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ABSTRACT

A document prepared by the Commission on Composition in the early 1970s, "The Student's Right to Write," has some usefulness for contemporary practitioners of writing instruction. The report reflects the strong initiative arising in the '70s to rethink the beliefs and practices then prevalent in the field of English teaching. At the time, the profession was being shaken up by new models and challenges to the traditional study of language and linguistics. In response to these trends, the National Council for the Teaching of English created the Commission to suggest how the profession needed to react to the emerging changes in the field of composition. The Commission initially mobilized itself to fight the inept scoring procedure used to measure composition achievement by the first National Assessment of Educational Progress. At meetings held to examine the existing methodology and to review the assessment exercises, Commission members challenged both the exercises and the scoring methods, and from that challenge came a contract that resulted in the design of a new method of assessment called "Primary Trait Scoring". The next focus of the Commission was to promulgate what was newly understood about the teaching of writing. In the beginning participation was meager, there was disagreement among members, and attempts at an orderly exposition of the field were unfocused. In hopes of discovering some common ground members assigned themselves a batch of short essays about issues worthy of concern, and it was as a result of this effort that 10 of the seminal group's first essays were collected and published as "The Student's Right to Write." From the contemporary viewpoint, some common themes can be identified, which include the importance of stimulating the imagination, fostering student self-esteem, and seeing the study of language as entangled with the study of society. An opinionnaire was created to determine feedback from practicing teachers. As an indication of the interests and concerns of a newly emergent field of study, "The Student's Right to Write" was a prophetic look ahead. (HB)

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The Right to Write: Some History

by Richard Lloyd-Jones

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The Right to Write: Some History

....Now, about the business at hand. My assignment was to talk about the inception of a document prepared by the Commission on Composition in the early seventies, The Student's Right to Write. I had forgotten about it, but I was told by a current member of the Commission that it made a lot of sense for such an ancient collection, and it might say something for the 21st century, so I dug among old papers to discover what we thought we knew. To suggest how it might have current usefulness I have been asked to describe it to you and remind you of what was going on when it was composed.

The Conant Report of 1959 had stirred up critics of education in the sixties much as did The Nation at Risk and other reports in the eighties. The Basic Issues Conference and the Dartmouth Conference were part of the general debate, and probably they all go back to the dislocations of American society set in motion by World War II. In any event, by 1970 we all were trying to find what we believed about the teaching of English and how we were to talk about it.

The formulation made commonplace by the Basic Issues Conference was that English was a combination of literature, linguistics and composition--the tripod. The metaphor had been institutionalized in the CEEB (later NDEA) Institutes and conveyed to most of us a genuine partition of the whole range of English Studies. After all, Gaul had been divided into three parts, why not English?

At the time the New Criticism was still dominant in literary studies, although the Institutes emphasized "Approaches to Literature" and thus implied a mild pluralism. But the study of language was challenging much of what we taught in our classroms about correctness and grammatical description. Partly it was a matter of social ferment, as different "new" students entered the colleges and raised questions about usage as it related to social class. Mostly, though, it was simply a new phase in linguistic study--especially with the emphasis on oral language within a particular situation as revealing what was standard for an occasion. Bloomfield, Fries, and Baugh, and Webster's Third and Chomsky and Gleason and many others were shaking us up. Anthropological, semiotic and neurological studies required new and competing systems of descriptions of grammar and syntax. Council members often found the Council itself publishing errors

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about language and being inept in explaining the new studies. It was the linguistics leg of the tripod that kept us in hot water. Composition was still given only lip service.

To respond to the sudden awareness of new knowledge the Council decided to create Commissions to suggest how we needed to react to the new ideas and to review our policy statements and publications to protect us from foolish error. Even though linguistics probably showed the greatest immediate need, the tripod offered the most complete structure for examining the content of our field, so the three basic Commissions were created as super standing committees of the Council. Other commissions and standing committees--mostly created later--addressed special issues that affected all three, as in Curriculum, Research, or Censorship or expanded subject areas as in Media. But here we are concerned with composition, so now I'll ignore the work of the other areas.

Sister Mary Philippa Coogan, the first director of the Commission, immediately defined us with a rebuttal task. She and Richard Braddock, who then edited the newly formed Research in the Teaching of English, had written strong negative reviews of the first report on achievement in composition published by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The Commission mobilized itself to fight what it considered an inept scoring procedure. NAEP was at once responsive, however, for at the LasVegas convention Henry Slockett of NAEP invited the Council to take part in a conference aimed at improving the Assessment and thus forestalled a strong Business Meeting resolution condemning the NAEP report. Robert Gorrell and I, from the Commission, and three others from the Council joined several psychometrists in examining the existing methodology and in suggesting new methods. That conference was followed two weeks later by another led by Walker Gibson to review actual Assessment exercises. I represented the Commission and the first scoring conference at that meeting. We challenged both the exercises and the methods of scoring, and from that challenge in turn came the contract which allowed Carl Klaus and me to design some exercises and scoring guides for the second assessment and operationally create Primary Trait Scoring.

That effort of the Commssion provided one focus for organizing its policies--essentially opposition to multiple choice tests of writing and opposition to either analytic scoring or to rhetorically vague samples of writing. But the testing issues were soon taken over by other committees, and the Commission needed to focus on its positive assignment--promulgating what was newly understood about the teaching of writing. We weren't even sure we knew what we agreed on and certainly we did not have any neat theory to encourage

orderly exposition of the field. To some extent we were a field only by virtue of the metaphor--the tripod--which gave us a label. Furthermore, attendance at early meetings was less than complete. If my notes are correct, Sister Mary Philippa could count on Alvina Burrows, Wally Douglas, Bob Gorrell, Nick Hook, Priscilla Tyler, Esther Westendorf, and me to produce on demand--four of us primarily connected by way of CCCC. Others came later, but those early meetings were a marvelous seminar. We were all really self-taught in the area, and we had come through different doors, so our sessions were exciting for us as we shared our insights, but the meetings were virtually devoid of products, something we could offer the profession. We agreed on high generalizations--practically useless in serving our constituents--but we could not agree on any overall strategy for approaching our assignment. Still, we were all English teachers and task-oriented, so we had to invent something.

In hopes of discovering some common ground we assigned ourselves a batch of paragraphs or short essays about what we considered isolated issues worthy of concern. Perhaps we would now call them "Issues and Trends" to fit the current annual reports of Commissions and Standing Committees. At the time we hoped they would be defining concepts, something that would reveal what we meant by "composition" and would guide professional discussion and in-service training.

Alas, when we turned in our papers, we still had fragments--fun, but fragments. We decided to make a virtue of what we could not help. We charged Sister Mary Philippa to produce a collection of some of the essays and suggested that she box pithy paragraphs from other essays and slip them among the texts to lend visual interest and imply our disconnectedness. I think we sought the effect of Familiar Quotations, wayward wisdom one could browse through. We would provoke discussion. The title, The Student's Right to Write, fit the times with its concern for rights in general and the right to read in particular, but we doubtless liked the play on the sound. I'm not sure why we chose the singular "student", though. We wanted to rouse people to consider their practices in the classroom.

In the end we included ten essays of about 5 to 10 pages each. Douglas reviewed the current state of composition teaching, especially the reasons for requiring writing, and I had a piece on psychological and linguistic views of creativity. Burrows wrote on motivation, and Tyler reviewed practices in English schools, for we followed soon after the Dartmouth Conference that had been for many an introduction to British theories. Gorrell wrote on ancient and modern rhetoric, Hook on language studies in general and Delores Minor on usage. Westendorf wrote on evaluation in general and I also added an essay on scoring. Hook finished up with

a piece on training teachers. For each essay there was a set of mostly open-ended questions for discussion.

From the point of view of 1992 one can perhaps identify some common themes that preoccupied the Commission. Clearly it acknowledged that writing was useful in daily life, and conventional practices were important, but members were even more interested in writing that stimulated the imagination, organized one's perceptions, and created a "self" or "persona". Implicitly they wanted to support student confidence and self-esteem as purveyors of knowledge. They wanted to root out negativism and reductionism--excessive correction and simple minded prescriptions. They saw the study of language entangled with the study of society and were sympathetic to socio-linguistics. Language was to be understood and described in particular situations, not in some ideal and abstract model. Indeed, they were concerned with communication in the broad sense including all of the media. All writing was "creative" so literary language was just another variation on the basic study of writing.

To emphasize our tentativeness still more we created an opinionnaire of some 55 statements about composition teaching, inviting respondants to agree or disagree mildly or strongly. The idea was that we'd use the book in various workshops and the opinionnaire would stimulate discussion and give us some feedback about where we should go next. I recall that we did receive some results, but I was not able to find any copies. Probably we considered the results indecisive, and anyway the statements were designed primarily to encourage talk, not to argue a position or to fit a poll. Some would still work to prod thought, some seem dated. Here are samples: 3. Grades are the most effective way of evaluating compositions. 11. Successful writing can be achieved only if all themes are carefully corrected by the teacher. 13. Assignments during the last two years of high school should require primarily expository writing. 17. Composition courses should include instruction in viewing film and television and reading newspapers and magazines. 19. In order to avoid errors in sentence structure, weak students should be encouraged to write only short simple sentences. 23. Students should be discouraged from using the first person pronoun in their compositions. 33. Teachers should write all compositions they assign to students. 54. Creative dramatization, role playing, and pantomime are interesting forms of release but have little effect on written composition. Perhaps the most fun in reading the statements is to imagine the general set of beliefs that made some of them likely topics for discussion at all.

I found it pleasing to read through the old book. Part of me notes that most of our "new" ideas to rouse the profession were really quite ancient ones. There was a strong classical strain in the statements. Another part of me notes that the

spirit of recent language philosophy was also present long before it became fashionable in literary circles. To be sure theories are not worked out systematically, nor is there an awareness of how the new theories conflict with classical theory in the abstract, but the practical advice really illustrates new theories and leads to rather sensible accomodation. Maybe if one really pays attention to what happens in particular cases, the results will be sound in theory. In that sense The Student's Right to Write probably does serve as a good flashlight, if not a beacon, to the future of composition studies. The interest is mainly for historians, though, because we have had a number of bright lights since, and the current Commission can deal with those.

Richard Lloyd-Jones
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